You Asked

What Hebrew manuscripts did the writers of the Septuagint rely upon?

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The Vorlage Question

The Septuagint translators did not work from any surviving manuscripts we have today; instead, they used a Hebrew "Vorlage" (source text) that existed in Alexandria and Palestine during the 3rd to 1st centuries BC, none of which have survived intact. No original exemplar manuscripts have come down to us—our knowledge of these source texts comes entirely from reconstructing them via comparison with later witnesses.[0][1]

Evidence From Dead Sea Scrolls

The Qumran discoveries at the Dead Sea gave scholars their first direct glimpse of pre-Masoretic Hebrew textual traditions, some of which align closely with the Septuagint rather than the later Masoretic Text. This confirmed that the LXX translators were not working from a single, uniform "proto-Masoretic" text but from a pluriform Hebrew textual tradition that had multiple competing versions circulating in the Second Temple period. For example, Qumran manuscripts of Jeremiah (4QJerb, 4QJerd) match the significantly shorter Greek version of Jeremiah, providing direct Hebrew evidence that the LXX translators used a genuinely different, shorter Hebrew edition of that book rather than mistranslating or abridging it.[1][2][3][0]

Book-by-Book Variation

Since "the Septuagint" is really a collection of separate translations made by different translators over roughly two centuries, the underlying Hebrew source texts varied from book to book. Scholarly consensus, reinforced by Qumran evidence, holds these general patterns:[0]

- Pentateuch (Torah): Translated first, mid-3rd century BC, from a Hebrew text broadly similar to what became the Masoretic tradition.[0]
- Jeremiah: Translated from a shorter Hebrew edition, distinct from the longer Masoretic edition, later confirmed by Qumran fragments 4QJerb/4QJerd.[1][0]
- Samuel and Kings: Often reflects a Hebrew Vorlage closer to the Qumran Samuel scrolls than to the Masoretic Text, as seen in the 1 Samuel 10:1 example where the LXX preserves text missing from the MT due to scribal eye-skip (parablepsis).[0]

- Proverbs: Translated from a Hebrew source with different verse and chapter ordering than the Masoretic edition, alongside some material unique to each tradition.[0]
- Deuteronomy 32 and Isaiah: Show notable alignment with Qumran Hebrew readings that sometimes diverge from the Masoretic Text.[1]

Relationship to Later Hebrew Texts

Because the Masoretic Text itself was only finalized centuries later (the earliest complete copy, the Leningrad Codex, dates to AD 1008), the Septuagint actually predates our oldest complete Hebrew manuscripts by over a millennium, making it one of the most valuable indirect witnesses to ancient Hebrew textual traditions. Where the LXX and Masoretic Text agree, this confirms remarkable scribal accuracy over centuries; where they diverge, textual critics use tools like vocalization differences (since ancient Hebrew was written without vowel points) and scribal error patterns to reconstruct what the original Hebrew Vorlage likely said.[0]